How to Talk to the Press

A Practical Guide to On the Record, Off the Record, Background, and Deep Background

Whether you are a public official, a concerned citizen, a whistleblower, or someone who has simply never spoken with a reporter before, understanding the rules of engagement with the press is essential. These rules exist to protect both you and the journalist. They are not complicated, but they must be understood and stated clearly — before you say a word.

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The Golden Rule

Everything you say to a journalist is **on the record by default**. If you do not explicitly state otherwise — and receive the journalist's agreement — before you speak, anything you say can be quoted, attributed to you by name, and published.

This is the single most important thing to understand. There is no take-back. There is no "I didn't mean for you to print that." If you said it and didn't set the terms first, it's fair game.

> **The terms of any conversation with a journalist must be agreed upon by both parties before the conversation begins. A journalist is not obligated to accept your terms. You are not obligated to speak.**

The Four Levels of Attribution

1. On the Record

What it means: Everything you say can be published and directly attributed to you by name and title. This is the default setting for every interaction with a journalist.

What the journalist can write:

> *"The project has been mismanaged from the start," said Jane Smith, Town Supervisor.*

When to use it: When you want your name attached to your words. When you are making an official statement. When you want the public to know exactly who is saying what. This is the most powerful and credible form of sourcing. If you believe in what you're saying, say it on the record.

2. Off the Record

What it means: The information you share cannot be published at all. It cannot be quoted. It cannot be paraphrased. It cannot be attributed to you or to anyone. The journalist can use it only to inform their own understanding or to pursue the story through other means.

What the journalist can write: Nothing. The information is for the reporter's eyes and ears only.

When to use it: When you want to point a journalist in the right direction without being connected to the information in any way. When you have knowledge of wrongdoing but fear retaliation. When you want to help a reporter understand the full picture but cannot afford to be seen as a source.

Important: Not all journalists will agree to go off the record. Some newsrooms have policies against it. A journalist may decline your terms, and at that point, you can choose not to speak.

3. On Background

What it means: The journalist can publish the information and may paraphrase what you say, but cannot attribute it to you by name. Instead, you are described by a general identifier agreed upon in advance.

What the journalist can write:

> *"According to a town official with knowledge of the application, the process was rushed and the required public notice was not properly issued."*

When to use it: When you want the information to be published but cannot have your name attached. When your position or relationships make public attribution risky. This is common in government reporting, where officials may face political consequences for candor.

Key detail: The descriptor used to identify you ("a senior official," "a person familiar with the matter," "a neighbor on the road") should be negotiated before you begin talking. Make sure you are comfortable with how you will be described.

4. On Deep Background

What it means: The journalist can use the information in their reporting, but cannot attribute it to anyone — not by name, not by description, not at all. The information must be presented as the journalist's own reporting or as independently established fact.

What the journalist can write:

> *"The application was submitted during the October inclusion period, and the required public hearing was held with minimal public notice."*

No source is referenced at all. The reporter states it as established fact, confirmed through their own reporting.

When to use it: When even a vague description of the source could identify you. When the circle of people who know the information is very small. When the consequences of being identified are severe.

Quick Reference

Level	Can They Publish It?	Can They Use Your Name?	Can They Describe You?
On the Record	Yes	Yes	Yes
On Background	Yes	No	Yes (agreed-upon descriptor)
On Deep Background	Yes	No	No
Off the Record	No	No	No

How to Set the Terms

Setting the terms of a conversation with a journalist is simple, but it must be done correctly. Here is exactly how to do it:

Step 1: State your terms before saying anything substantive.

Before you share any information, tell the journalist what level of attribution you want. Do this clearly and plainly.

SAY THIS:

> *"Before I say anything, I'd like this conversation to be on background."*
>
> *"I'm willing to talk, but only off the record. Is that something you can agree to?"*
>
> *"I want to share some information on deep background. That means you can use it, but you cannot attribute it to me or describe me in any way. Agreed?"*

Step 2: Wait for the journalist to agree.

The terms are not in effect until the journalist explicitly agrees. If they say "I can't agree to that" or "I'd prefer on the record," you have a choice: renegotiate, or don't talk. Do not start talking and hope for the best.

Step 3: You can change terms mid-conversation — but only forward.

If you've been speaking on background and want to put a specific quote on the record, you can say:

> *"I'd like to put this next part on the record."*

You can also go the other direction:

“What I’m about to tell you is off the record. Agreed?”

But you cannot retroactively change the terms of something you have already said. Once words leave your mouth under one set of rules, those are the rules that apply.

Common Mistakes

- **Saying “this is off the record” after you’ve already said it.**
  It’s too late. The terms must be set before the information is shared. A good journalist may honor your request as a courtesy, but they are not obligated to.
- **Assuming the journalist knows what you mean.**
  Different people use these terms differently. Don’t just say “this is off the record” — clarify what you mean: “That means you cannot publish this or attribute it to anyone.” Make sure you and the journalist are operating under the same definition.
- **Thinking “off the record” means “don’t use my name.”**
  That’s background, not off the record. Off the record means the information cannot be published at all. Confusing the two can have serious consequences.
- **Talking to a journalist without setting any terms.**
  If you didn’t set terms, you’re on the record. Period.
- **Assuming a friendly conversation isn’t “really” an interview.**
  If you are talking to a journalist and the subject of their reporting comes up, you are in an interview. It does not matter if you’re at a party, at the grocery store, or on the phone catching up. If you don’t want it published, say so — before you say anything else.

Your Rights as a Source

- You have the right to **decline to speak** to any journalist at any time, for any reason.
- You have the right to **set the terms** of any conversation before it begins.
- You have the right to **end the conversation** at any time.
- You have the right to **ask the journalist to read back your quotes** for accuracy (though they are not always obligated to do so).
- You have the right to **ask who the journalist works for** and what the story is about.
- You do **not** have the right to approve or review the final story before publication. Some outlets offer this courtesy; most do not. Do not expect it.

A Final Word

Journalists are not the enemy. The vast majority of reporters are trying to get the story right. They want accurate information. They want credible sources. They want people who are willing to stand behind

what they say.

If you have information that matters — about your town, your government, your neighborhood — do not be afraid to share it. Just know the rules before you pick up the phone.

And if you’re not sure? Ask. A good journalist will explain the terms to you. A great journalist will make sure you understand them.

The Powell House Press
josh@thepowellhousepress.com